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Mitt Romney in Denver: “Obamacare” as Ideological Enthymeme

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This paper argues that surface-level analysis of political argument fails to explain the effectiveness of ideological enthymemes, particularly within the context of presidential debates. This paper uses the first presidential debate of the 2012 election as a case study for the use of “Obamacare” as an ideological enthymeme. The choice of a terminological system limits and shapes the argumentative choices afforded the candidate. Presidential debates provide a unique context within which to examine the interaction of ideological constraints and argument due to their relatively committed and ideologically homogenous audiences.

Keywords: Barack Obama, enthymeme, ideology, Mitt Romney, Obamacare, presidential debates, public address

Introduction

On 3 October 2012 Mitt Romney and Barack Obama took the stage at Magness Arena at the University of Denver and participated in the first of three debates prior to the general election. Prior to the debate, Romney had suffered a slow bleed of independents and moderate conservatives heading into the Denver debate (John F. Kennedy School of Government 2013: 210). Commentators described the debate as “do-or-die,” “a game-changer,” a “reboot” of the campaign, and an opportunity for a “breakthrough” (Martin and Haberman 2012; see also Crummy 2012b; Fitzgerald 2012; Balz and Rucker 2012). Critics were also uncertain about the impact of Romney’s previous arguments on economic inequality, the near-calamity of the GOP convention, or his persistent vagueness in regards to his tax

policies, but most agreed that the campaign needed a significant boost to remain competitive in the last month of the election (Fitzgerald 2012; see also Guzder 2012; Grant 2012; Lee 2012). Despite attempts to lower expectations by the White House campaign team, Mitt Romney entered the debate in Denver with substantially lower expectations than the president (Levinson 2012; see also MacAskill 2012b).

Likely voters favored Obama by a 2-to-1 margin before the debate, and they cited experience and expertise as the reasons for their preference (Milbank 2012: A02). However, the expectations did not match the results. Rather than a “knock-down, drag-out fight,” the first debate was “relatively sleepy” with “no fireworks or big ‘moments’ to speak of” and “unusually civilized” (Metzler 2012; see also Haberman 2012; Mariucci and Farofoli 2012). Most pundits agreed that the biggest difference between expectations and results was the lackluster performance of the president (Medved 2012; see also MacAskill 2012a; Ingold 2012). Post-mortems of the debate blamed a variety of factors, including the president’s lack of preparation, the altitude in Denver, Obama’s overconfidence, or a general absence of enthusiasm displayed by the president (Alter 2013; see also Tau 2012; Harnden 2012; Krebs 2012). Hence, the debate failed audience expectations in two ways: it was less exciting than viewers expected and the favorite was soundly defeated in the minds of the pundits and viewing audiences.

Mitt Romney’s debate performance, on the other hand, was surprising to audiences but should not have been unexpected. Debates were one of his strengths, and a variety of debate formats and opponents throughout the lengthy primary season tested and refined many of his strategies and debating skills (Fallows 2012). In fact, over the course of the previous fifteen months, Romney participated in 19 of the 20 scheduled primary debates. After the debate, voters agreed that Romney had closed the gap between himself and the president and was in a much better position to win the election than prior to taking the stage in Denver (Stelter 2012: A22; see also Milbank 2012: A02). David Axelrod, senior advisor to the Obama campaign, spoke about the result: “I think what he did was, in one night, he got back those Republican-leaning Independents. I think he improved enthusiasm among his base. I think the race snapped back to where it was essentially before the convention” (John F. Kennedy School of Government 2013: 218). David Simas, director of opinion research for the Romney campaign, reflected on the impact of the debate and its effect on the election: “What we saw . . . was a consolidation back to Governor Romney . . . it opened up the door . . . for the first time we saw his very favorable numbers among the Republicans rivalling numbers that we had seen in 2008” (218–19). Romney, drawing on more than a year of experience in primary debates, outperformed Obama in the eyes of the media and voting public.

There are three reasons the Denver debate warrants scholarly attention. First, the rise of the Tea Party in 2010 places new constraints on Republican candidates seeking the presidency. Bradberry and Jacobson (2014) find that the influence of the Tea Party on conservative voters increases their hostility toward Obama and his policies, increases their receptiveness to unwarranted and unsubstantiated arguments, and constitutes the most loyal, active, and largest component of the Republican party. In order to appeal to this newly activated wing of the party, Romney needed to craft a strategy that appealed to the

electorate as a whole and simultaneously addressed the demands of an increasingly conservative and influential segment of his own constituency.

Secondly, there is disagreement about the result in the Denver debate. On the one hand, poll numbers and media coverage immediately following the debate favored the challenger (John F. Kennedy School of Government 2013; see also Medved 2012; MacAskill 2012a; Ingold 2012; Tau 2012; Harnden 2012; Krebs 2012). In addition, David Zarefsky (2015) argues that Obama failed to capitalize on mistakes made by Romney in the debate and did not make strategic use of his time, allowing Romney to control the performative and strategic elements of the debate. On the other hand, Rowland (2013) focuses on the substantive arguments and finds that Obama's performance was superior based upon the evidence provided and arguments developed during the debate. The disagreement between a substantive and strategic analysis highlights a key feature of the Denver debate that this paper seeks to address. Why do strategic and substantive analyses find divergent results? And, consequently, what argumentative features of the debate can be analyzed to explain both findings?

Finally, presidential campaign debates are important foci for analysis because they "set the agenda" for the rest of the campaign, and the first debate in any campaign cycle is the most important for audience perceptions of the candidates and their campaigns (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003; see also Holbrook 1999). McKinney and Warner (2013) find that presidential debates do very little to change voter preferences in the general election. However, if voters find debates to be useful tools in electoral decision-making and their evaluation of the debates is not based on substance, then they must be influenced by other factors. Research shows that low-knowledge voters typically evaluate debates based on the appearance of candidates, rather than the substance of their arguments (Lenz and Lawson 2011). The obvious reasoning would argue that Mitt Romney's aggressiveness and active debating style contrasted directly with Barack Obama's "sleepiness" and general passivity during the debate, and that this contrast led directly to the public perception that Romney dominated the debate.

In what follows, I argue that Romney's argumentative strategy for dealing with this new and constraining environment relies on a particular form of argument that eschews substance for ideologically oriented claims and enthymematic reasoning. In addition, I examine how Romney uses strategies that adapt to competing audience demands in political environments where fringe and center collide. I argue that it is more than just characterological appearance or performative elements of a candidate that were at work in Denver, but rather the appearance of argument, or the performance of argument without the corresponding substance. Specifically, the strategic and substantive disagreements point toward the conclusion that Romney's strategy was to rid his arguments of substance.

Ideological enthymemes

In this section, I outline the subspecies of enthymeme that I label ideological enthymeme and distinguish it from polysemic rhetoric, ideographs, and dog whistle politics. Ideology, when utilized in argument, relies on the principle of identification. In order to connect with diverse audiences in a multicultural and heterogeneous polis, a politician or candidate will

search for ideas which connect their purpose and goals with others' and develop a connection "in terms of some principle they share in common, an 'identification' that does not deny their distinctiveness" (Burke, 1969: 22). At first formulated as particular proposals, ideological principles evolve and develop over time into a universal that "becomes transformed into a partisan weapon" (23). Identification not only occurs at the substantive level of arguments but extends beyond substance to the use of "stylistic identifications" and the use of "speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea" (46, 55). Ideology extends beyond the idea or concept to *how* it is used in argument.

Additionally, politicians face ideological constraints when they adjust their strategies or approaches to the demands of an audience, and can only succeed in identification "insofar as he yields to that audience's opinions" (56). In other words, candidates running for political office can face a situation where ideologies constrain their choices in such a way that stylistic or tonal demands can outstrip the need to provide substance. Ideology operates as "a kind of rhetoric," where ideas become so closely interconnected that linkages exist between concepts, whether explicitly or implicitly intended (88). Ideological argument includes "extralinguistic factors," "is partial or partisan," and "is concerned with advantage, not only in analyzing the hidden advantage in other terminologies (or 'ideologies'), but also in itself inducing to advantages of a special sort" (103). The strategic opportunity to connect concepts without doing the heavy lifting of reasoning can offer a substantial advantage, allowing a speaker to merely gesture in the direction of an idea without the demands to fully develop the implications it entails.

One way that speakers can utilize ideology strategically is by developing enthymemes that call upon particular aspects of that ideology. Enthymemes find their persuasive power in the field of ideas to which listeners are particularly attuned (Delia, 1970). In the case of ideological enthymeme, the choice or selection of premises is determined by the considerations toward a particular audience and the advantages gained or constraints faced in making one choice over another. If the selection of one premise offers a more substantial advantage to the speaker, then the enthymeme is ideological in the sense that the audience's ideology fills in the missing premise. Some scholars (Madden 1952; see also McBurney 1936) have argued that a missing premise is not necessarily the defining feature of the enthymeme. However, Bitzer (1959) finds that this interpretation masks the distinction between enthymeme and syllogism and undermines a more productive understanding of this species of argument.

In conjunction, Lanigan's (1974) claim that no two audiences necessarily complete the enthymeme with the same conclusion supports my conception of ideological enthymeme as a subset of enthymematic reasoning in a broader sense. This also comports with Conley's (1984) conclusion that enthymemes can be stylistic or formulaic shortcuts but are not necessarily truncated syllogisms. In that sense, the ideological enthymeme relies on a system that directs the audience to use their preferred ideology to fill in this premise rather than that one. A particular ideology rests on a set of syllogistic operations, but once established the system of ideological connections offers enthymematic shortcuts for any speaker willing to utilize them to their advantage. Conley also argues that enthymemes are effective because they are flexible enough to fit a diverse range of situations and limited by the potential resources offered up by an audience. Ideology is one such resource that offers

potential ground for identification while constraining the possible number of interpretation of the enthymeme offered by the speaker.

Before moving on to an analysis of the debate, two distinctions should be made between ideological enthymeme and similar forms of argument. First, ideological enthymemes are more narrowly focused than polysemic messages (Ceccarelli 1998). Polysemy can exist regardless of strategic choice, and by contrast, ideological enthymemes are directed by the considerations of strategy. In developing ideological enthymemes, a speaker chooses to access a particular system of beliefs, values, or ideas in order to avoid the substantive demands of formal argument. Subtext and polysemy exist independent of choice or intent. For example, Hiland (2015) shows how polysemic messages benefited Romney in the 2012 primary debates by allowing him to co-opt opponents' policy positions and avoid commitments that would otherwise restrict his future argumentative choices. This strategy, however does not offer substantial benefits for a candidate in presidential debates where the distinctions are clearer and the nuance between a dozen candidates from the same party are not present on stage.

Ideograph, like polysemy, is also too broad to deal with the same strategic functions as the ideological enthymeme. For McGee (1980), ideographs are "language imperatives" that "are the basic structural elements, the building blocks of ideology" (7–9). The ideograph is at once a source and byproduct of ideology. For example, the idea of "worker" and "factory" might be the building blocks of a communist ideology, while simultaneously, the idea of "redistribution" and "proletariat" are the ideographic effects of that ideological system's development. An ideological enthymeme is a strategic attempt to develop enthymematic reasoning in order to access and make use of those ideographic elements of an ideology but is itself not an ideograph. Additionally, the ideological enthymeme of "Obamacare" might link up with ideographs of "taxation" and "small government" and "welfare," which are parts of progressive and conservative ideologies, but ideographs are not strategic moves by dint of their existence. Ideological enthymemes are a strategic maneuver (Zarefsky 2008) while ideographs are the target or products of that strategy.

Second, the ideological enthymeme is a broader species of argument than the dog whistle. According to Ian Haney-López (2014), the dog whistle "means speaking in code to a target audience . . . seeking to surreptitiously communicate support to small groups of impassioned voters whose commitments are not broadly embraced by the body politic" (4). Specifically, dog whistles are a form of ideological enthymeme but represent only one iteration of the broader category (Haney-López 2014; see also Cook 2012; Cook 2013; Whitley 2014). Dog whistles function as ideological enthymemes in that they address an audience constituted by a particular set of beliefs but have distinct advantages in their ability to offer speakers an added dimension of deniability and their inaudibility to certain audiences. Ideological enthymemes are strategic in the sense that they rely on commitments to certain ideas to increase the flexibility and range of argumentative options available to a speaker. Dog whistles offer strategic flexibility but do so in the sense that they are coded to be heard only by a particular subset of the audience and obfuscate their code for other audiences. Rather than obfuscating, the ideological enthymeme works for all audiences but differs in meaning depending on the audience's appetite for one ideology over another. Ideological enthymemes are not disingenuous or manipulative but are strategic

uses of enthymematic reasoning to overcome time restrictions inherent within argumentative contexts. They are specifically curated strategic moves designed to eschew the constraints of traditional form in favor of a more efficient means of rebuttal and refutation, an easier way to cover the “spread” of arguments in a specific debate (Zarefsky 2015: 246). When the ideological enthymeme is developed in a way that obscures its racially coded intention, it becomes a dog whistle, but all ideological enthymemes are not necessarily dog whistles.

In summary, ideological enthymemes are a subset of enthymeme that utilize ideology as a means to identify with audiences already joined together in ideological commitment. They function as shortcuts for speakers by utilizing prior knowledge to avoid substantive demands of evidence and reasoning in relation to a particular conclusion. Ideological enthymemes function to activate ideological associations between one field of arguments and another by directing the audience’s attention toward those connections. In this way, ideological enthymeme is both more specific than a polysemic message and broader than a dog whistle message. Burke (1969: 135) compares this sort of association to a universal principle that can be applied to many contexts, or borrowed from one context to apply to another.

For Burke, identification relies heavily on notions of “form” and the satisfaction of audience appetites for a particular form or style of argument (58). The type of enthymeme can be directed toward a particular network or cluster of associations that are already present within the mind of the audience member and functions by connecting the enthymeme with the preexisting ideological commitment. In this sense, ideological enthymemes are a strategic maneuver (Zarefsky 2008) that aims to identify with a particular audience associated with one another through ideology. Given that the time limits of presidential debates constrain the strategic options available to participants, it is essential in the television era that the candidate find means to sidestep and overcome the demands of evidence and reasoning. This understanding of ideological enthymeme complements the findings of Boydston, Glazier, and Pietryka (2013) that the salience of certain messages or topics constrains a candidate’s choice, and seems to validate the argument that candidates’ control over the agenda or strategy is limited in the sense that it is reliant on the audience’s preferences. Ideological enthymemes are arguments that turn this constraint into a strategic advantage, offering the candidate more flexibility in a system that trends toward rigidity.

In what follows, I analyze the argumentative strategies developed by Mitt Romney in conjunction with the use of ideological enthymeme. I examine how pre-debate preparation informed the former governor’s strategic options during the debate, how the control of turns and time allocation helped expand Romney’s control of the debate, and how ideology functioned to expand the range and flexibility of argumentative strategies available to Romney at the debate in Denver. Ideological enthymeme is a particularly useful tool for understanding the first presidential debate of 2012. Romney’s strategic approach appeared successful on the surface but relied on shifting enthymemes to cover more argumentative ground without necessarily developing evidentiary support, leaving the challenger with plenty of ideological support but little to no factual basis for his arguments.

Pre-debate strategies

Prior to the debate, Mitt Romney made several strategic decisions that aided his debate performance. Most importantly, the Romney campaign understood the necessity of performing well as a challenger. Beth Meyers, senior advisor to Romney, indicated that “people would want to see it on the line” and that “whatever was happening in the campaign” they would need a “winning jolt” (John F. Kennedy School of Government 2013: 208). The audience expected Romney to take risks in the debate and to appear a winner. Such a performance would create momentum for the campaign and swing undecided voters over to the Romney camp. Secondly, Romney arrived in Denver ready to engage in an all-out attack on the president’s record. Meyers described his attitude: “On every issue . . . we were very focused on finding an attack—a place to attack President Obama on every issue . . . that’s what we did so that when Mitt came on that stage at the first debate, he was loaded for bear on every issue” (208). In sum, Romney’s campaign devised an offensively focused strategy and targeted specific policies of the president in an attempt to place Barack Obama on the defensive—in other words, the best defense is a good offense.

On the other hand, the Obama campaign made several crucial errors in strategy. David Axelrod admitted the team “over-prepared” the president with “too much material” (210). Put another way, Obama loaded up on evidence but overlooked the threat faced by his challenger’s debate prowess. In conjunction, the campaign focused mainly on policy defense and content preparation, limiting the president’s ability to adapt to the performative and stylistic demands of the situation. The campaign strategists approached the debate as a discussion rather than a televised debate (211). The team developed a strategy of “limited engagement” that Obama took to an “illogical extreme” in the moment of the debate (214). The combination of these two mistakes left the president in a no-win situation. Obama could not improve his situation playing defense, and Romney’s attacks would be unchallenged. The preparation for the debate by both campaigns established a situation in which Romney’s advantages were maximized and Obama’s barriers to victory were strongest. The resulting debate would not hurt Obama but would give Romney a much needed boost, making the election far closer than it could have been otherwise.

Control of turns and time allocation

Mitt Romney approached the Denver debate with three argumentative strategies. First, he engaged in the debate as a “clash of philosophies” rather than a contest of policy ideas (Baker 2012: A0). This approach echoed the observation that presidential debates are a “gladiatorial contest in miniature” (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988: 119). Romney undermined the authority of the moderator by treating the debate as an ideological combat rather than a discussion about the future direction of the country (Metzler 2012). He played the role of ideological gladiator, focused primarily on attacking Obama’s philosophy of governance and ignoring time limits and turn taking when necessary to continue the attack (Dionne 2012: A23). The tactic established new parameters to which Obama was unprepared in the moment to adapt.

Audiences who watched the debate were expecting a “knock down” fight between incumbent and challenger. Several media outlets amplified this particular aspect of the debate, framing the confrontation as a “fight” and “duel” between two heavyweights (Metzler 2012; see also Crummy 2012a:2S). The media primed the audience for a confrontation rather than a conversation, and Mitt Romney was more than happy to oblige. An NBC News poll conducted days before the debate indicated that Romney’s adherence to conservative ideology and principles was one of the most important factors in his approach to the debate (NBC News 2012: 11). Audience expectations framed the way that Romney’s success would be measured in two ways—a head-on confrontation with the president and his defense of conservative ideology. Fulfilling psychological expectations can supplement and exceed the effectiveness of the content of an argument (Burke 1957). Independent and moderate Republicans expressed their appetite for a particular type of confrontation before the debate, and Romney provided them with exactly what they wanted.

One essential element of the norms in presidential debates is the assumption that candidates will have equal time, take turns, and be regulated by a moderator in these aspects (Jamieson and Birdsell 1988: 13). Romney quickly defied these norms and challenged the moderator, Jim Lehrer, about the speaking order. At the conclusion of the first segment on the economy, Romney appealed to Lehrer, demanding that he get the final word in the segment. “Jim, the president began this segment, so I think I get the last word, so I’m going to take it. All right? (Chuckles)” (National Public Radio 2012).¹ Romney claimed the right to respond in kind to the president’s statements and only asked for permission as an afterthought. Lehrer objected briefly but Obama interrupted the exchange between Romney and Lehrer to cede the ground to his opponent. “He can—you can have it,” said Obama in a clear attempt to avoid an argument about the norms of the debate. Obama ceded an essential performative advantage to Romney on the question of speaking order. “That’s not how it works,” replied Lehrer, but it was too late to reestablish norms already eschewed by both participants. The norms of rebuttal order and time limits were discarded by both candidates, leaving Lehrer with no leverage to enforce them during the rest of the debate.

Another example of this occurred early in the debate during an exchange over Medicare. At the end of the segment, President Obama attempted to rebut Romney’s voucher plan for Medicare when he pivoted back to national health care and the entire system:

PRESIDENT OBAMA: One last point I want to make. We do have to lower the cost of health care. Not just in Medicare and—

MR. LEHRER: We’ll talk about that in a minute.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: —but—but overall.

MR. LEHRER: Go. OK.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: And so—

MR. ROMNEY: That’s—that’s a big topic. Could we—could we stay on Medicare?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Is that a—is that a separate topic? I’m sorry.

MR. LEHRER: Yeah, we’re going to—yeah. I want to get to it, but all I want to do is very quickly—

MR. ROMNEY: Let’s get back to Medicare.

MR. LEHRER: —before we leave the economy—

MR. ROMNEY: Let's get back to Medicare.

MR. LEHRER: No, no, no, no—

MR. ROMNEY: The president said that the government can provide the service at lower—

MR. LEHRER: No.

MR. ROMNEY: —cost and without a profit.

MR. LEHRER: All right.

MR. ROMNEY: If that's the case, then it will always be the best product that people can purchase. But my experience—

MR. LEHRER: Wait a minute, Governor.

MR. ROMNEY: My experience is the private sector typically is able to provide a better product at a lower cost.

Two important elements of this exchange highlight Romney's ability to drive the conversation and undermine debate norms. First, Romney said "Let's get back to Medicare," to which Lehrer objects somewhat strenuously. Romney continued with his line of argument, and eventually Lehrer capitulated. Romney's insistent and continued pressure on Lehrer shows the level of control he maintained over the moderator.

Secondly, Romney spoke over Lehrer several times during this exchange, making the "no, no, no, no" line from Lehrer nearly inaudible. Romney dominated the exchange and displayed a strategic control over the topics being discussed. Rather than complete the discussion, Lehrer attempted to end the segment as quickly as possible and instead of asking for an articulation of the differences between the two candidates, Lehrer satisfied himself with merely establishing that one exists. Romney, even after repeated objections from Lehrer, continued to change the topic until he succeeded.

Romney's ability to control the tone and scope of the debate exchanges directly impacted Lehrer's capacity to limit the length of answers and shape the balance of the debate. Romney gained the upper hand from this approach. Lehrer reminded the candidates of the time constraints several times throughout the debate, helpless to enforce them. He said "we're way over our first 15 minutes," to which Romney responded, "it's fun isn't it?" Romney's strategy worked to undermine Lehrer's control over the debate, and Lehrer was unable to enforce the time limits throughout the evening. Lehrer tried to stop six different segments that went over time in the debate but five of those six attempts were unsuccessful. Mitt Romney's control of the debate parameters succeeded throughout the evening.

The control over time and turn-taking offered three strategic benefits. Romney spent less time defending his own policy stances as long as he could keep up the attack on President Obama's record. Romney also utilized this approach to avoid the barriers that many challengers face when debating against an incumbent president, the credibility afforded by the office of the presidency and the record of the incumbent. Finally, Romney challenged Lehrer to enforce time limitations and undermined the control over the debate. Lehrer's inability to control the time constraints of the debate turned the typical constraint of time limits into an advantage for Romney. Romney was more prepared to operate with fewer limitations, and Obama seemed uncomfortable overstepping the bounds of expectation.

Ideology as supporting material

In addition to challenging the limitations of turns and time limits, Romney relied on ideological assumptions as supporting materials in order to bypass the need to use substantive support. By making it more difficult and time consuming to engage in a balanced discussion about policy issues, he challenged the utility of evidence and reasoning as support for arguments. Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) also observed this as a feature of modern presidential debates but orient their understanding of this phenomenon around “pieties” and “trustworthiness” rather than ideological commitment (125). Romney freed himself from the burden of proof and undermined President Obama’s ability to use refutation and counterevidence to employ traditional tests of reasoning. Romney took advantage of the idea that an election represents a contest of ideologies and implicated the use of evidence and reasoning as products of ideological bias.

Romney consistently challenged the president’s statistics and use of studies throughout the debate, establishing an unequal balance in the burden of proof. In one of the more memorable exchanges, Romney indicted the use of studies to challenge the president’s criticism of Romney’s tax plan:

There are six other studies that looked at the study you describe and say it’s completely wrong. I saw a study that came out today that said you’re going to raise taxes by \$3,000 to \$4,000 on middle-income families. There are all these studies out there.

Romney employed four strategies to undermine the use of supporting evidence. First, Romney challenged the authority of Obama’s evidence with a quantitative advantage, citing a ratio of six to one. Second, he attacked the qualitative advantage of Obama’s study, arguing that the studies he cited are macro-level evaluations of Obama’s evidence and offered the audience a more comprehensive explanation than the president. Third, Romney challenged the recency of Obama’s study by calling upon a report he read earlier in the day. Finally, Romney discarded the idea of studies altogether. “There are all these studies out there,” he said, implying that any attempt to discern which claim is more accurate is futile.

The entire purpose of this exchange revolves around one of Romney’s key goals in the debate—distancing himself as much as possible from the tax cuts in his platform. In the short term, the tactic worked; however, nine days after the debate, the *Atlantic* published an article calling into question the validity of the studies and their usefulness as support for Romney’s tax plan (O’Brien 2012). Articles challenged Romney’s “six studies” and began to appear in several major newspapers shortly thereafter (Khim 2012; see also Schlesinger 2012). In fact, the six studies Romney cited prove that his tax plan was infeasible and would have been impossible to implement (O’Brien 2012). During and immediately following the debate, the strategy worked to Romney’s immediate advantage. In the long run though, the media found Romney’s evidence wanting. Despite the fact that the “studies” he cited were largely produced by ideologically suspect organizations, the limits of

the debate and the dismal state of public reason made it almost impossible for Obama to effectively make this point clear during the debate.

Attacking the use of evidence and reasoning had clear benefits for Romney in the short-term. First, Romney argued that all evidence provided during the debate is a product of ideology. By claiming that both sides have “studies” and that evidence can be produced on-demand from think tanks and research teams, evidence itself is implicated as suspect. Second, Obama’s ability to refute Romney’s arguments was constrained by tying his arguments to a particular form of ideological production. As such, reasoning itself is a damaged form of decision-making because “there are all these studies out there,” and by extension, it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide between them. Third, Romney’s strategy solidified audience uncertainty about his ideological bona fides without forcing him to directly attack the evidence or empirical proof behind the success or failure of the policy. A corollary benefit to this approach allowed Romney to avoid the burden of proof associated with his past political achievements, which were frequently used to undermine his claim to conservatism. Fourth, this strategy enabled Romney to use an enthymeme to call upon audience commitment rather than put his own arguments to the test.

“Obamacare” as ideological enthymeme

The previous strategic moves set the stage for Romney to utilize arguments about health care reform as an enthymeme that relied on ideological commitments. In Denver, Romney developed the “Obamacare” enthymeme to implicate a series of unrelated issues in the debate and utilized the concept to rely on audience ideology without stating conclusions outright. This strategy avoided the details of policy implementation and undermined the requirement for evidentiary support. In addition, the enthymematic flexibility of “Obamacare” allowed Romney to apply the same logic to a variety of contexts wildly beyond the scope of health care. Different iterations of the argument allowed Romney to chain out the Obamacare enthymeme in a way that encapsulated his overall evaluation of the entire administration.

“Obamacare” functioned as an enthymeme designed to resonate with far-right, moderate conservative, and independent voters. Long a subject of immense definitional dispute by both political parties, Romney was actually the first politician on record to use the term (Cox et al. 2012: A12). In 2007, he spoke at a campaign speech in Iowa, “The path of Europe is not the way to go. Socialized medicine. Hillarycare. Obamacare.” (Sarlin 2012; see also Talev & Goldman 2012). Fundamentally, the argument can be summed up as—the Affordable Care Act is a form of socialized medicine which puts the nation on a slippery slope toward socialism, this, being the fundamental problem with the European Union, means that Affordable Care Act dooms America to financial ruin. The rhetorical and argumentative effectiveness of this enthymeme relies on three interrelated ideological connections that operate together to engage multiple audiences with contradictory expectations of the candidate.

First, Romney used the name itself—Obamacare—to shape the terms of the debate. Viewers of the debate literally saw this happen. Romney used “Obamacare” first in Denver, and tells the president that he uses “that term with all respect.” Obama quickly responded by saying “I like it” and later in the same segment said “I have become fond of

this term.” Jim Lehrer began using the term to describe the president’s health care policies when transitioning into the segment of the debate on health care. “Now let’s move to health care,” he said, “where I know there is a clear difference—(laughter)—and that has to do with the Affordable Care Act . . . ‘Obamacare’.” Rather than using the name of the legislation and correcting the candidates, Lehrer used Romney’s terminology consistently for the rest of the debate. When Lehrer said to Romney “tell the president directly why you think what he just said is wrong about ‘Obamacare’,” the name rolls off Lehrer’s tongue as easily as it does Romney’s.

For Romney, Obamacare is a *title of titles*, it “sums up (that is, literally contains) all the particulars of things and ideas” that the audience should dislike about the president (Reuckert 1983: 256). A title of titles contains the “perfect essence” of an idea and encourages audiences to associate the kernel of the idea with all of its derivations. “One goes up, arrives at the title of titles . . . and comes back down through all the levels . . . bringing (borrowing) back what one discovered at the top, following the reversible logic that is everywhere at work in these analogies” (Reuckert 1983: 256). Romney made meta-level arguments about the problems with Obamacare, and after having established their credibility with the audience, carried them back down to other policies, and condemn the whole lot with a single enthymeme. If Obamacare is a misguided policy, all of the administration’s policies are misguided. If Obamacare is socialized medicine, all of Obama’s policies contain elements of socialism. In this way, a title of titles is a particular form of ideological enthymeme where the policy is given a particular name and connected to other policy arguments within the ideology so that whenever the name is employed, the ideological associations with that name are immediately called into being.

Next, Romney developed a “path” metaphor that allowed him to talk about the Affordable Care Act in what Burke (1974: 84) calls the “end of the line” mode. This type of argument utilizes “principles of entitlement and entelechy,” in which everything is “driven toward the perfection of itself, to the end of its line” (Reuckert 1994: 9). Romney encouraged the audience to take the implications of Obama’s health care policies to the end of the line. Rather than use a typical slippery slope fallacy, Romney relied on entelechy and articulated the Obamacare enthymeme as the first stage of a national shift toward socialism. The argument did not hinge on the actual effectiveness of the president’s health care policy but rather relied on the audience’s conception of the “path” down which the policy takes the nation.

The path metaphor appeared several times throughout the debate, and offered Romney many opportunities to expand his attacks on the president’s policies. On economics, Romney contrasted himself to the president’s approach by arguing that “it’s going to take a different path, not the one we’ve been on, not the one the president describes as a top-down, cut taxes for the rich.” In another example, Romney tied the path metaphor directly to another Regan-era metaphor, trickle-down economics. He argued that “the path that we’re on has just been unsuccessful” and challenged Obama to defend “a bigger government, spending more, taxing more, regulating more—if you will, trickle-down government.” In both instances, Romney specifically attacked the policies of the status quo, and by implication, attacked the end result of following those policies to their logical conclusion.

Later in the debate, Romney directly tied Obama's policies to those of countries in Europe suffering economic problems at the time. "I don't want to go down the path to Spain," he says, "I want to go down the path of growth that puts Americans to work, with more money coming in because they're working." By this point in the debate, Romney had completed the cycle from indictment of the status quo to the implication that the president's policies will inevitably take us "down the path" to socialism. Comparing the economic policies of the Obama administration to those that led to economic disorder in Spain seemed tenuous at the time, and Romney was certainly light on the specifics of the comparison. However, by utilizing the "end of the line" enthymeme, Romney connected smaller narratives about the Affordable Care Act as socialized medicine to ideological opposition to socialism.

In his concluding statement, Romney reiterated the path metaphor and tied it to the choice voters would be making in the upcoming election. He argued that "there really are two very different paths that we began speaking about this evening . . . they lead in very different directions. And it's not just looking to our words that you have to take in evidence of where they go; you can look at the record." The voters, however, could not "look at the record" because Romney used a policy in the status quo to argue about the future potentiality of creeping socialism, a record not yet written.

During the debate, Romney developed this strategy to attract fiscally undecided moderates, some of whom may have been unsure about his tax policies. Romney connected wasteful spending of the Affordable Care Act with the budget deficits to our economic competitor, China. "Is the program so critical it's worth borrowing money from China to pay for it?" Romney tied the specter of big government to the concept of budget deficits, and implied that those deficits put us in the same position as Europe's faltering economies. Differentiating between the "path to Europe" or "path to Spain" and the "path to growth" set up a dichotomy between (successful) capitalist economies and (failing) socialist economies. The enthymeme helped Romney to make the debate about ideology, not policy. The strategy allowed Romney to take one set of arguments about the policy and carry them over to other policies and issues that have little to nothing to do with health care.

Finally, Romney cast the choice between himself and the president as an ideological contest and used the "clash of philosophies" expectation to elevate the election to that of an existential crisis for the American way of life. Romney applied this logic to a variety of issues throughout the debate. When speaking about Medicaid during the debate, Romney argued that the entire situation is a states-rights issue and suggested that the entire nation "craft a plan at the state level" rather than implement a single federal mandate. Rather than addressing the technicalities or providing a nuanced response, Romney implied that the choice should be made based on an ideological commitment to state governance over federal authority. Shifting to the economy, Romney argued that Obamacare has "killed jobs" and even implied that the president is personally responsible for the failed recovery:

I just don't know how the president could have come into office, facing 23 million people out of work, rising unemployment, an economic crisis at the—at the kitchen table and spent his energy and passion for two years fighting for "Obamacare" instead of fighting for jobs for the American people.

Romney directly blamed the president for *making a choice* to enact health care at the cost of the recovery, and rather than addressing the difficulty of dealing with two crises simultaneously, Romney argued that Obama bungled both. In addition to killing jobs, the administration raised taxes “by a trillion dollars” under Obamacare. Calling health care reform a tax casts a positive term “reform” within the ideologically charged realm of “taxes.”

Romney also argued that Obamacare also destroyed the bipartisan spirit in Congress and drove both sides into their respective corners. Republicans didn’t want Obama’s version of health care reform, but “you pushed it through anyway” Romney said to the president “without a single Republican vote.” This characterization implied that Obama’s policy stoked the ideological divide and that it is health care reform that is responsible for the highly charged partisanship in Congress. Romney used his own record as counterexample to Obama’s ideological motivation: “I like the fact that in my state, we had Republicans and Democrats come together and work together.” This argument undercut Obama’s ability to attack Congress while simultaneously blaming Obama for the failure of the recovery and bipartisanship.

Romney also charged the president with taking away a public good. The health care reforms, he said, “put people in a position where they’re going to lose the insurance they had and they wanted.” Romney targeted voters who already have health insurance, people for whom the fear of losing one’s health insurance operates far more effectively as a bogeyman than does the promise of a more efficiently run system. Finally, if voters had any doubt about the consequential nature of this election, Romney cast the choice in existential proportions—“If the president’s re-elected, ‘Obamacare’ will be fully installed. In my view, that’s going to mean a whole different way of life for people.” At its fully realized extension, Romney used the Obamacare enthymeme to present an ideological choice to the audience. Choose the incumbent, head down the path to Spain and socialism, and change one’s “way of life,” or pick the challenger and head down the “Path to Prosperity.” Typically, the incumbent retains the advantage of defending the status quo, but Romney deftly turned the tables, developing a line of reasoning that it is Obama who threatened the stability of the status quo.

The final argumentative strategy employed by Romney maximized several advantages. First, Romney attacked the Affordable Care Act as an ideological product, rather than a policy proposal implemented by the federal government. This approach allowed Romney to attack the philosophical underpinnings of “Obamacare” without addressing the question of its effectiveness. Secondly, by connecting “Obamacare” philosophically or tangentially to other policies (including tax policy, government spending, Wall Street reform, foreign policy, etc.) Romney implicated those policies as part of the same ideological system. Romney tied a varied number of positions and arguments to the Affordable Care Act without providing evidence of their connection. Additionally, by selecting aspects of the health care policy that are social support programs, Romney indicted the policy as socialized health care and argued that the policy is one step along the “path to Spain” or the “path to Europe.” Romney provided the conclusion to the argument (that “Obamacare” will fail) without providing premises, allowing the audience’s ideological system to fill them in. Finally, by establishing the difference as ideological, not practical, Romney provided an immediate evaluation of the president’s performance through an ideological lens

while avoiding the criticisms of his own policies. This approach also allowed Romney to disregard or negate many of the president's refutations without providing counter-examples or evidence to disprove Obama's argument. By transforming the debate from one about policies to one about ideologies, Romney established a framework wherein it was easier to attack the incumbent through implication by association.

Conclusion

Mitt Romney's control of time and turn taking, development of ideology as evidentiary support, and use of "Obamacare" as an enthymeme were relatively successful in the short term. Neil Newhouse, polling director for the Romney campaign, explains the effect of the debate on the race:

These voters saw Mitt Romney, and they watched the debate. They're impressed. . . . And the image that had been portrayed of him, painted of him, had begun to kind of wash away a little bit . . . 47 percent kind of went away . . . it was all good for us. It gave us perceived momentum. Not just that our numbers were moving . . . but we began to see some erosion and some softening of Obama support. The information flow numbers, everything, began to kind of trend our way a little bit so that you got a sense there was a wind at our back. (John F. Kennedy School of Government 2013: 219)

Romney was successful in keeping both Barack Obama and Jim Lehrer off balance throughout the debate. He also diminished the utility of supporting evidence for both candidates. These two strategies enabled Romney to control both the arguments within the debate, but the conditions under which those arguments were perceived by the viewing public.

As an enthymeme, Obamacare was useful for multiple audiences. Romney shifted between one attack and another in Denver, using the flexibility provided him by the enthymematic reasoning and preventing Obama from going on the offensive. Romney played into the ideological commitments of the audience to create "clusters" of arguments that obviated the need for independent supporting evidence for each argument. Using particular terms in particular configurations, Romney guided the audience toward the conclusion that the president has failed in his first term, and used the ideological commitments of audience members to malign other policies. While speaking of health care reform, Romney smoothly implicated policies of taxation, states-rights, the economy, bipartisanship, public opinion, and so on. Obamacare operated as the central enthymeme around which all other political arguments were arranged. The demands of televised debates, the format, and the partisanship on both sides of the political spectrum are all conditions under which these types of ideological enthymemes operate with maximum effectiveness. They take little to no time to use in a debate, have relatively few downsides, and feed all the worst habits of the American electorate.

In addition, the use of an ideologically founded enthymeme operates for debate audiences more powerfully because it can condense complex policies and ideas into a simpler, more digestible soundbite. These enthymemes calcify argument because they retain the

persuasive power of the enthymeme but simultaneously obscure, rather than reveal rational argument. In the Denver debate, Romney was able to focus on conflict and theatricality, utilizing ideologically oriented enthymemes to gesture towards conclusions already held in the audience's minds. As a result, Romney portrayed traditional refutation of arguments as a weakness, rather than a strength. This resulted in the perception that Obama's strategies were signs of passivity, rather than activity.

The study of ideological enthymemes adds two important contributions to argumentation scholarship. First, ideological enthymeme points toward other types of argument like dog whistle politics, entitlement, and entelechy as subspecies of this larger category of enthymematic reasoning. More research can and should be done into different types of ideological enthymeme, and efforts should be made to investigate different enthymematic approaches to ideological argument. Second, and more importantly, ideological enthymeme provides an explanation for why a strategic abandonment of substance operates so effectively for candidates in presidential debates. This contribution to argumentation theory and debate scholarship may contribute to the discussion about debate performance versus argumentative substance that seem to produce divided opinions about the outcome of political debates.

Note

1. All quotations from the debate were taken from the National Public Radio transcript and audio recording of the debate.

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